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Job Training Groups Fear Budget Ax

*John Konstantaras*

Lawrence Payne, 56, center, and Myriame Bartscher, 22, right, pack boxes during a training program at the Greater West Town Community Development Project, April 12, 2011.

by **KARI LYDERSEN** | Apr 20, 2011

The economic crisis forced Brenda Williams to close the small soul food restaurant she owned on the South Side for six years. Aside from a one-month stint on a construction site, she hasn't been able to find work in the four years since.

Last fall she applied at a warehouse for airplane and construction machinery parts. She never heard back. But she reapplied and had an interview with the same company April 11, and now she has good reason to be more hopeful.

That's because for the past two months she has been enrolled in a federally-financed job training program at the Greater West Town Community Development Project, a nonprofit organization that places nearly all its graduates in jobs.

"I've had no income at all," she said. "But now that's definitely going to change."

The free three-month program offers training courses in woodworking and shipping and receiving to about 100 jobless and impoverished Chicagoans each year. On April 11, Williams deftly maneuvered a forklift around the West Town project's mock warehouse, practicing moving boxes of iced coffee and pineapple juice.

The trainees had feared they could be one of the last classes, as the proposed fiscal year 2011 federal budget called for nearly eliminating the job training program that funds Greater West Town's work. Last week they learned the program was largely spared, with only \$182 million rather than the proposed \$3 billion cut from the Workforce Investment Act.

But Greater West Town executive director Bill Leavy said they didn't have long to celebrate. Congress is already debating the 2012 budget, and job training programs have been targeted for

massive cuts.

Greater West Town relies on the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) for more than 40 percent, or about \$500,000, of its job training funds. Leavy said that if his budget is substantially reduced, the organization might have to close the spacious job training center that it opened last fall in a converted century-old envelope factory on the West Side.

"It would be disastrous," he said. "We'd definitely have to cut the number of participants and staff, and with the overhead I don't know if we could keep doing it. It's not like we can shrink the building."

The act provides \$5,000 grants to individuals for job training, and finances organizations—including Greater West Town, the Instituto del Progreso Latino and the Jane Addams Resource Corporation, all in Chicago—so they can provide free training programs.

The act also finances private organizations that run about 30 Chicago-area centers where people can apply for the individual training grants and access other social services. The National Able Network sees 600 to 800 people a day at its center in Pilsen, according to Grace Jenkins, its chief executive. It receives \$6 million annually in WIA financing, about half of which goes directly to individual grants, she said.

Many Republican legislators and critics of current initiatives said multiple job training programs run by different federal agencies are redundant and lack accountability. Preliminary 2012 budget proposals call for streamlining various federal job training programs into one "career scholarship" program. While few details of this plan have been released, leaders of job training organizations said that kind of restructuring would likely slash the amount of funding available for their work.

"There are specific needs that each one of those programs is meeting," said Rachel Gragg, federal policy director for the National Skills Coalition, whose members include job training programs, community colleges and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. "A returning vet has different needs than a dislocated worker who got laid off from an auto assembly plant. These programs are serving different people, it's not that a bunch of people are double-dipping or triple-dipping."

Greater West Town focuses on hard-to-employ people. About half of its participants lack a high school diploma, about a quarter of them have criminal records and some are homeless.

Williams, 43, considered backing out of the free program because she couldn't afford gas to commute from the Far South Side. A \$25 weekly transportation stipend from Greater West Town and encouragement from her family kept her going.

While Greater West Town focuses on entry-level jobs, the Jane Addams Resource Corporation in Ravenswood relies heavily on about \$300,000 annually in WIA funds to train more than 50 people per year in advanced manufacturing techniques. Employers say that even with high unemployment, there is a dearth of workers qualified for "middle skills" jobs — including computerized machine operation, welding and health care — that require more than a high school education but less than a college degree.

Fifty percent of Illinois jobs in 2009 fell in the middle skills category, but only 41 percent of Illinois workers were qualified to fill them, according to an analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Labor by the National Skills Coalition. In the high- and low-skills categories, the number of Illinois workers outstripped the number of Illinois jobs by five percent and four percent, respectively.

Finding skilled precision-machine operators is a constant battle for S&C Electricity Company, a Rogers Park manufacturer of components for the energy industry, said training manager Gene Cottini.

"We remain committed to staying in Chicago and hiring from the local area, but people lack the foundational skills, so we end up spending thousands upon thousands doing the remedial training ourselves," he said. "We could spend that on something else if we had more highly trained people showing up at the door."

Trelleborg Sealing Solutions, a Streamwood company, has had similar difficulty. Officials spent nine

months searching for qualified employees to fill 12 advanced computer positions, said Kathy KEBLIS, director of human resources. Both S&C and Trelleborg employ trainees from the Jane Addams Resource Corporation, which last year placed 54 workers in jobs whose wages started at an average \$14 an hour.

“We have a spike in people with strong working histories in manufacturing who have been laid off, and their skills have become obsolete,” said Guy Loudon, executive director of the Addams Resource Corporation.

Managers and owners of Chicago-area businesses help the job-training programs develop curricula so that trainees’ skills match the needs of the labor market. Chicago companies dealing in lumber, steel, pumps, warehousing, woodworking and design were among 20 employers who signed a letter to U.S. Senators Dick Durbin and Mark Kirk asking them to push for full financing of the Workforce Investment Act.

“It’s absolutely the best investment, because it increases people’s earning power exponentially for the rest of their life,” said Maureen Hellwig, senior program director of Erie Neighborhood House, which receives federal financing to prepare workers without high school degrees or English skills for job training programs. “You’re giving people the skill to be independent—not dependent on government subsidies.”



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